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Understanding aging and the aged through mainstream films

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UNDERSTANDING AGING AND THE AGED THROUGH MAINSTREAM FILMS

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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING AGING AND THE AGED THROUGH MAINSTREAM FILMS

by Linda Janet Proudfoot

This thesis analyzes five mainstream films for their contributions to a better understanding and more realistic view of growing old in America. The analysis demonstrates that by showing elders as complex, capable, and positive individuals, instead of reinforcing traditional stereotypes of the aged as sick, deficient, and unhappy, these films can change public perception and decrease ageism. They also illustrate how elders can adapt to or lessen the impact of some of the challenges that may occur during aging.

These films can be valuable to academic and community educators, as well as society at large, in countering the mass of misperceptions and negative information about aging and the aged that exist in our youth-oriented culture.

Contents

Introduction

The mass media is known to be a major contributor to the stereotyping of older adults and the aging process (Kubey, 1981). Most of us have seen a feature film or a television series that portrayed an elderly character (usually secondary to the main hero or heroine) as either sick, irritable, childish, or "just plain crazy." These images reinforce society's ideas about aging as a period of inevitable decline, and seniors as one- or two-dimensional "characters." The feature film industry has been particularly egregious over its history in turning out countless films aimed at the youth market which portray seniors as cardboard caricatures, having little resemblance to actual American elders (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997).

However, as film critics and devotees take a reflective look at the motion picture industry's first century, it becomes apparent that significant changes have been taking place. In the last two decades, more film-makers have been willing to take a chance on producing high quality films which appeal to adults and the older population of film-goers and video renters. A growing number of films are now challenging myths about aging and are demonstrating that the difficult issues that are often encountered by older adults are not so hopeless as we may fear. At last, the complex issues of old age and aging are slowly coming out of the closet and being shown in a new light that is more positive and realistic.

This thesis analyzes a selection of five mainstream films for their contributions to a better understanding and more realistic view of growing old

in America today. This analysis will demonstrate that these films portray mature adults who are complex, interesting, and capable of dealing with the challenges of old age. As such, the films can be valuable as resources for academic and community educators attempting to counter the mass of misperceptions and negative information about the aged that exist in our youth-oriented culture.

The appearance of more mainstream films featuring older adults has undoubtedly been influenced by the changes in demographics in America over the last few decades (Haskell, 1998). Previously unimagined numbers of people are living longer and more productive lives than ever before. At the turn of this century only 4 per cent of the population was over 65 (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Due to a number of factors, not the least important being better disease prevention and advanced medical practices, the aged now make up over 13 per cent of the population. Life expectancy at birth in the United States has increased from 45 in 1900 to 76 today (Atchley, 1997). This "graying of America," especially in the age of marketing and Madison Avenue, has gradually been having an effect on the film industry. In a review of the industry, Haskell (1998) lists some of the contributing factors. First, aging baby boomers (a generation of movie-goers) have continued to go to the movies as mature adults, driving a need for more complex, adult films. Secondly, a significant percentage of older actors, directors and producers have been able to accumulate enough influence and financial resources to promote and produce limited market films about less popular topics such as aging. Finally, the increased awareness in America of our mostly negative view of aging has led film producers and viewers alike to seek out more detailed and realistic

information on the subject. All of the above factors have resulted in a larger, richer source of commercial films dealing with aging for our examination.

Literature Review of Aging in the Mass Media

Robert Butler first coined the word "ageism" in 1969 to describe the widespread prejudices and stereotypes, both positive and negative, that are applied to people solely on the basis of age. For decades social scientists and gerontologists have been studying the impact of mass media on society's attitude toward the aged. It has been demonstrated that mass media plays an important role in formulating the values, ideals, needs, and images that Americans hold of each other (Kubey, 1981; Turner & Killian, 1987). As early as 1969, Schramm pointed out that the media, driven by the advertising industry's focus on young people, had directed little attention to older adults, and that seniors were far more active and involved in society than media images implied (Schramm, 1969). Examinations of television programs in the 70s and early 80s revealed that the elderly were not only misrepresented but practically invisible on network television, making up only two per cent of the characters (Charren & Sandler, 1983; Robinson, 1989). Cirillo (1993), examined verbal imagery in printed journalism using *Newsweek, Time,* and *U. S. News & World Report*. He found numerous examples of the use of metaphors and rhetorical tricks that brought up negative images of aging, for example, using adjectives such as "rusty," "rancid" and "planned obsolescence" to describe the physical process of aging. Vesperi (1993) pointed out how the choice of images and photographs in printed journalism often promote

stereotypes of the aged by using images that depict them as disabled, idle, and poor.

In 1986, the stereotyping of older people by college students was studied by Patchner. First, students were surveyed on their views and understanding of the aged. Then they were shown movies which either showed positive or negative images of older adults. Post-tests indicated that the movies depicting positive images changed students' former attitudes to the better, but those with negative and stereotypical images merely reinforced the attitudes they already had (Patchner, 1986).

With the "graying of America" and the increased awareness and sensibility to the issues of aging in the 70s and 80s, more realistic and positive portrayals of the elderly began to appear in the media. For example, in the late 80s, television seemed to enter a "golden age" and broadcast several prime time weekly programs featuring older adults, including *Golden Girls, Matlock, In the Heat of the Night, Murder, She Wrote* and *Jake and the Fatman* (Bell, 1992). These programs featured seniors who were intelligent, attractive, vital, and sometimes, even sexy. (Unfortunately, the trend was short-lived, and a look at 1998's television lineup revealed almost no regular prime-time series portraying an older adult as a main character. An exception is Dick Van Dyke's *Diagnosis: Murder*.) In 1981, the unprecedented success of *On Golden Pond* at the box office (a movie casting two septuagenarians in the leading roles), proved that if the subject was treated in a positive manner, and portrayed by an excellent cast, the public would indeed pay to see a movie primarily about aging and intergenerational relationships. A few more box

office successes followed in the 80s and early 90s: *Trip to Bountiful, Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, all featuring strong actresses in the roles of real, sometimes flawed, but always unique seniors (Haskell, 1998). *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* were heralded by the Retirement Research Foundation as breaking new ground for promoting understanding of aging issues, and were given Owl Awards (Retirement Research Foundation, 1998). Unfortunately, the foundation was formed in 1984, so *On Golden Pond* and *Trip to Bountiful* were too early to be eligible for awards. Another film, *Cocoon* (1985), received less approval from critics, but was a box office success. It brought aging issues to the viewing public, although embedded in a fantasy plot.

In spite of the accolades given to *Trip to Bountiful, Driving Miss Daisy* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Markson and Taylor (1993) criticized the portrayals of the older women as reinforcing gender stereotypes, since they were portrayed respectively as either completely dependent, somewhat stubborn or foolish, or having little value beyond the sharing of her life review. The same study, which analyzed Hollywood's Academy Award winners over the last six decades, found that once actors and actresses were past the age of 59, their numbers dropped dramatically in both nominations and winners. Another study of top-grossing feature films over a period of fifty years found that aging women were "under-represented, unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent" (Bazzini et al., 1997). So, even as it was breaking ground and promoting better understanding of aging issues, the feature film industry was still reflecting many of society's prejudices and attitudes toward older adults.

The use of films to study society's view of aging and the aged is not a new practice. *The Gerontologist* has featured reviews of educational films on aging since 1976 (Yahnke, 1988). The majority of educators and community agencies, however, commonly use educational documentaries and short dramas to expand the awareness and knowledge of their students or clients. Patchner (1986) used three different educational films on aging to illustrate the importance of movie selection, demonstrating that some films could just as easily reinforce negative attitudes about aging as they could change attitudes for the better. In 1988 Yahnke produced a comprehensive guide to over forty educational films on aging, which includes summaries, discussion questions, and suggestions for enriching the viewer's experience of each film. In addition, he includes a check list of common topics covered in gerontology courses that are featured in each film, such as ageism, loneliness of old age, family relationships, life review, and late life relationships, to name a few.

Only a relatively few works have suggested the use of mainstream, popular films to expand understanding and realistic knowledge of aging and the aged. Several of those concentrated on the four critically acclaimed films already mentioned: *On Golden Pond, Trip to Bountiful, Driving Miss Daisy,* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Bazzini et al., 1997; McKee & McLerran, 1995; Markson & Taylor, 1993). In 1992 Fisher explored ageist stereotypes through the use of five commercial films about aging issues, produced in the 70s, and 80s (Fisher, 1992). (Only one, *On Golden Pond*, was a box office success.) In 1995 McKee and McLerran offered a particularly incisive examination of the classic film *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and its value as a resource for illustrating contemporary gerontology precepts and theories. Hesley and Hesley (1998)

took the concept one step further and produced a book on the use of popular films to aid clients in psychotherapy. It included a chapter on movies for individuals struggling with aging issues, citing *On Golden Pond* as a good example of intergenerational conflict.

This critical analysis is intended to add five more films to the valuable, though modest, collection of films that can be used to expand knowledge of aging and the aged.

Myth versus Reality in Aging

How has the popular film industry reinforced many of the myths and stereotypes of aging and the aged? How do we know what is real? How can we recognize films which promote better understanding of later life? We can begin by being aware of the actual characteristics and circumstances of people over age 65 in America, as researched by gerontologists, social scientists, and the medical sector, and comparing them with what we see in popular films.

Most films in the past have relegated older people to secondary characters, since they are usually not seen as interesting enough to be the primary characters of a story. This allows producers and directors to typecast the oldsters in a few stereotypical, time-worn roles. Some examples include: the crazy old prospector, the irascible old storekeeper; the bitter old headmistress; the lonely, but kindly old school teacher; the scary old woman in the creepy old house; the oversexed grandpa, and so forth. Most of these characters have some kind of a disability, whether it be (often comically played upon) deafness, blindness, difficulty walking, being in a wheel chair or bed-bound, and, of course,

demonstrating some mental confusion or loss of memory. These portrayals have added to society's image of the aged as mostly disabled and mostly useless. It should be noted that a few images of older adults in movies are flattering, as in the wise old man in the village, or the ever-smiling grandma who is always baking cookies for the neighborhood children. Though positive, these portrayals still do a disservice by showing elders as one-dimensional and predictable.

What are the real characteristics of American older adults today? To begin with, most are not sick or disabled. In 1994, a study revealed that among seniors 65 to 74, 89 per cent reported no disabilities at all (Freedman & Soldo, 1994). Between the years of 75 and 84, still 73 per cent reported no disabilities. The study found that it is not until 85 and older that the rate of disability increases to 60 per cent, but that means that 40 per cent of people over 85 are still living independent and fully functional lives. Due to advanced medical techniques and people living a healthier lifestyle, the number of elders with disabilities has been going down, and some researchers believe that the reduction will accelerate in the future (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). This means that fewer people over 85 will have disabilities as time goes on.

Another myth is that a large percentage of older adults are "senile," a term which really just means old, but has been used by the lay person to mean "not all there" or being mentally deficient. These conditions, in fact, are not a part of normal aging. Gerontologists use the terms "cognitive disorders," (divided into delirium and dementia) and "mental disorders," all of which are not as pervasive in older adults as commonly believed (Sunderland, Molchan, &

Zubenko, 1995). Delirium is a temporary disorder that is usually a side effect of some other illness. Dementia, on the other hand, is a slow and usually irreversible condition affecting the brain, an example being Alzheimer's disease. Dementia afflicts only two to five per cent of people over 65 (Sunderland et al., 1995). The incidence does go up with age, but still does not go above 20 per cent in those over 85. Mental disorders do afflict from 15 to 25 per cent of elders (Administration on Aging, 1997). However, most of these elders suffer from depressive disorders, not ones which cause erratic or psychotic behavior. Both cognitive and mental disorders can be treated, and many older adults learn to lead functional and satisfying lives, in spite of them.

Another myth reinforced by popular films is that a large proportion of older adults, since they are believed to be mostly sick and disabled, must reside in nursing homes, and that once there, they die there. The reality is that only four per cent of elderly people reside in nursing homes on any given day (Administration on Aging, 1997). Many of the residents are only there for weeks or months and eventually return to their own homes. Actually, most seniors, when sick, are cared for by a spouse or family (Coward, Horne, & Dwyer, 1992). Most have family members who are close by, or who check on them regularly by phone, and most are not alone (Atchley, 1997).

One reason the oversexed older adult appears so often in popular films is that the stereotype plays on another common myth, that seniors do not have sex (thus making a sex-crazy septuagenarian seem preposterous, and probably mentally deranged). Again, gerontological research tells us that most seniors enjoy some sort of sexual activity, although it may be somewhat less frequent than in younger years. In a recent study of seniors aged 60 and over,

51 per cent had had a sexual partner in the past year, and among those with sexual partners, 80 per cent engaged in sexual activity once a month or more. 70 per cent of those who were sexually active said that sex was at least as emotionally satisfying as it was in their 40s (National Council on the Aging, 1998).

Films often depict older adults as isolated or alone. According to the U. S. Administration on Aging (1997), 76 per cent of older men are married. Note, however, that the picture is much different for women. There are approximately 5 times as many widows as widowers, and only 43 per cent of older women are married. On the positive side, 67 per cent of seniors live in a family setting and 73 per cent have a child living within about an hour's travel distance (Frankel & DeWit, 1989).

Lastly, seniors are not useless, or a drain on society. This widespread belief is wrong and unjust. According to Rowe and Kahn (1998), directors of the MacArthur Study of Aging in America, the reality is that our society does not count a great deal of productive activity as valuable (that is, unpaid labor is not considered "work"); older adults are not given an equal chance to get paying jobs; and finally, millions of older people are ready, willing, and able to increase their production if asked, whether it be paid or voluntary. Already, 12 per cent of older adults are part of the U. S. labor force (Administration on Aging, 1997), and at least one-third volunteer their services (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Still others spend countless hours caring for family members and neighbors.

Of course, not all the demographics and statistics on aging are positive. A disproportionate number of older adults (26.3 per cent) are below or very close

to the poverty line as defined by the federal government (Radner, 1993). Many do struggle with chronic diseases, such as diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease. And a rising percentage do succumb to Alzheimer's disease. Admittedly, every stereotype or myth gains acceptance because there is some truth or fact inherent in the belief. It might be argued that a popular film which depicts an older adult as disabled, grouchy or crazy is merely reflecting a realistic part of aging. The author would argue however, that it is not only what is shown that is harmful, but what is *not* shown. By choosing to show only a few, mostly negative characteristics of older adults, the film industry has had an enormous, negative impact on the ideas and values of its viewers, especially since feature films reach many thousands of people every day.

Typical Issues of Seniors

Besides looking at how older people are portrayed compared to reality and gerontological statistics, we can look at the issues (or lack thereof) that seniors are called upon to deal with in popular films. Are they realistic and typical? How does the the senior deal with them (or not?) Are the characters shown as capable, interesting adults, or helpless in the face of misfortune?

None of us would argue that growing old is a piece of cake. As Detective Sipowicz of NBC's *NYPD Blue* stated, "Gettin' old ain't for no sissies!" Seniors must deal with multiple losses and difficulties, often within a short period of time. There is the likelihood of loss of career, loss of a spouse, loss of function in one or more parts of the body, loss of long-term friends, loss of independence, and loss of a home or familiar surroundings. Problems encountered might be a

drop in income, boredom, loneliness, fear for personal safety, fear of death, or a feeling of uselessness. To all this, add feelings of guilt, anger, and denial about past events that cannot be changed. No wonder most of us dread getting older.

However, as the statistics mentioned above illustrate, most of us have misperceptions about how often or how early in older adult life these challenges occur. In addition, seniors can and do use a variety of techniques and skills to meet life's most difficult trials. For example, seniors can adapt to certain losses by changing their lifestyles or seeking support from others; they can compensate for loss of function by using aids such as canes, hearing aids, and glasses; and they can simplify their lives by keeping activities at a moderate level and relatively free of change. A recent study of seniors living independently in the community reported that most were highly satisfied with their lives, and 85 per cent thought they were more fortunate than most (Innes, Howard, Lewis, & Timon, 1997). Unfortunately, few images of capable, happy, or complex elders ever reach the big screen. The film industry has been remiss in not showing more films in which seniors meet challenges, learn new skills, grow in maturity, and lead satisfying and productive lives, as so many actually do.

Besides showing more positive and realistic images of aging, the film industry has the power to use creative techniques to underscore or promote the themes it chooses to explore. Since the films are meant to make money, expensive, state-of-the-art techniques of photography, lighting, music, and characterization may be employed to make the film more competitive in the market. Consequently, the end product may be more sophisticated and have more impact than an educational film on the same subject. Filming a story on

location, choosing a sound track which contributes to the theme, or using visual symbolism, for example, can make a movie more interesting and satisfying to watch. Also, since a popular film is usually about two hours long, and educational films are generally about thirty minutes long, there is more time to develop characters. All of the films in this thesis use these and other techniques to help viewers better understand and appreciate aging and the aged.

Methodology

This paper focuses on five mainstream films that deal with aging and older adults. The films are *Strangers in Good Company* (1990), *Dad* (1989), *Grumpy Old Men* (1993), *Age Old Friends* (1989) and *I'm Not Rappaport* (1996). Potential films for analysis were located by doing Internet searches, previewing films recommended by the Retirement Research Foundation, and viewing films that were recommended in various articles about aging. Martin and Porter's *Video Movie Guide 1998* (1997) was also helpful for providing summary plots, dates of release, and an idea of the potential value of a film. The final selections were chosen by applying the following criteria: 1) the central theme of the film is about aging and the resulting issues; 2) at least one of the central characters is an older adult (over 65); 3) the film was produced in the last decade, offering a more timely view of aging as it exists today; 4) it was given high ratings either by film critics or gerontology experts; and 5) it offers a particularly rich or unique source of information, that is, it deals with multiple aging issues or presents ground breaking views on aging.

The five films chosen also represent a variety of characters and situations: men and women, "young-olds" to "old-olds,"[1] singles and couples, and portrayals in both humorous and serious situations. It should be stated that the five movies chosen are not meant to be a comprehensive list or to be considered the "best" there are on aging issues. Rather, they are meant to be better-than-average examples from a variety of commercial films about aging that could be used by the educator, agency or individual, and they are available for rent at most video stores.

Each of the five films was viewed at least three times. Extensive notes were taken about the qualities of the main characters, the situations depicted, various aging challenges and how they were met, and film techniques used that especially helped to increase or enhance the viewer's understanding and appreciation of older adults. The different characters' situations and coping mechanisms were compared to each other and also analyzed for their ability to illustrate basic gerontological concepts.

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[1]Gerontologists typically divide the older population into the young-old (65 to 74), middle-old (75 to 84) and old-old (85 and over) (Atchley, 1997).

Analysis

The order in which these analyses are presented is based only on the author's intent to make them the most interesting to the reader.

Strangers In Good Company

The first film to be analyzed is different from the others in many respects. First, it is the least commercial looking, in that there is virtually no plot—but rather a series of vignettes. Secondly, the characters are played by non-actors, giving the film a more realistic, documentary-like feel. Lastly, the film was made by the National Film Board of Canada and lacks the typical high-budget appearance and fast-paced momentum that we see in most of the other selections. *Strangers in Good Company* is a cinematically artistic film, however, and it is generally available at video stores.

Strangers in Good Company is the story of seven elderly women, aged 68 to 88 (Ramirez de Arellano, 1992), who are stranded in a remote area of Quebec when their tour bus breaks down. The driver, the only younger woman, sprains her ankle when she hurriedly disembarks to investigate the problem. Since they have taken a detour from the main highway, they are miles from any assistance. The women hike a short distance to a deserted house near an idyllic lake and spend the next several days attempting to find food and attract would-be rescuers, while getting to know each other.

The women find no food left in the empty house, but they do find some utensils, a few old blankets, and a couple of mattresses left in the barn. They make beds out of reeds and share the meager remains of their lunches for supper. The next day, Constance goes looking for her childhood home, the

reason the group had taken the detour, and finds a picture-book cottage on the other shore of the lake. It is not made clear whether this is actually her former home, but it definitely has a profound effect on Constance. Throughout the film, the women move between the two houses, sleeping at the larger home at night.

The movie unfolds in a series of short scenes, usually dialogues, featuring two or three of the women at a time. As they begin to share their experiences with each other, viewers are given glimpses into the lives of each woman. These impressions gradually form a rich collage of experiences, emotions, and strengths unique to each individual. Indeed, by the end of the film we feel as though we know each woman personally and are as reluctant to say goodby as they are, when they finally must leave their wilderness haven.

Like many seniors, each of the women is living with one or more physical ailments, including arthritis, high blood pressure, heart problems, partial deafness, and visual impairment. However, they are all independent enough to be traveling alone (none appear to have met before the trip), defying the myth of dependency and helplessness of seniors, particularly women. Each has left the comfort of family or familiar surroundings to embark on an adventure of new sights and experiences. None of the women have left a partner behind, not unrealistic for their ages, since women are much less likely than men to have a partner after age 65 (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1992). We also learn that rather than being inactive or bored, several lead busy lives caring for grandchildren, taking classes, and in one case, carrying out the many services that come with being a nun.

Through the series of dialogues among the women, we learn about the many issues that must be dealt with in the elder years. According to many developmental sociologists and psychologists, the late life stage is as important as all the stages before and includes its particular trials and challenges that all seniors must overcome. Psychiatrist Allan Chinen draws on the theories of human development, particularly those of Jung and Erikson, to form his own concepts of the various tasks inherent in the last developmental stage of life. He calls the mastery of these tasks a "journey beyond the self" (Chinen, 1989 , p.146). To form this theory about aging, Chinen studied hundreds of adult folk tales from around the world, believing that, like dreams, they can be interpreted for their common themes and reflection of social contexts. From these "elder tales" he identified seven universal tasks of older adults. If seniors are unsuccessful in mastering these tasks, he believes, they are in danger of living their last years in bitterness and despair.

Chinen describes the tasks as follows: 1) elders must come to terms with multiple losses; 2) confront their own shortcomings and dark sides; 3) turn away from preoccupation with material things (wisdom); 4) eschew personal satisfaction for helping others and surrendering to a higher power (self-transcendence); 5) break from social constraints and the practical dealings of mid-life and recapture the spontaneity of youth (emancipated innocence); 6) suspend disbelief and become an acceptor of the magic and wonder of life and nature; and 7) act as mediators between their generation and the next ones.

All the steps Chinen describes may not be experienced by all seniors, but they make a useful framework for analyzing the reality and complexity of older

adults in popular films. Many of the tasks of older age are depicted in *Strangers*. All the women are dealing with multiple losses, but Constance seems to be having the hardest struggle dealing with her failing health and partial loss of hearing. In addition, she fears that the end is near and that she will lose her independence and die in a nursing home. She is depressed, spending most of the time isolated from the rest of the group. She looks at Mary's drawing of a dead sparrow and laments, "That beautiful thing will never sing again. Death is all around us." She examines her past and expresses guilt that she never pursued the "artist's life" she once dreamed of, because she was too busy "mating and breeding." This self-confrontation is a pivotal task for the second half of life, as Carl Jung emphasized in his "Stages of Life" (1933). As her days in the wilderness wear on, however, Constance becomes enthralled with the beauty of the lake and the wildlife. She realizes she is happier here then she has been in a long time. She begins to let go of the past and her preoccupation with her health. She starts to take part in the group activities, recognizing the value of her newfound friends. She exhibits a new spontaneity by singing and playing cards with the others. Eventually, she pours her medications into the lake, casting aside practical considerations, giving herself up to a higher power, that of nature and the "grand plan." She has apparently come to terms with her life and accepted it for what it was; some good, some bad. Erikson (1959) called this step "integrity," the task of self-affirmation that leads to peace of mind and self-satisfaction. When the plane finally arrives to take them home, Constance walks with a new sense of tranquility and self-acceptance. Her transcendence is evident.

Another common theme in gerontological theory is Erikson's (1963) theory

of generativity: to age successfully, one must be able to forego self-reward and give support to others, particularly younger generations. (This corresponds to Chinen's task of transcendence, turning from personal satisfaction to helping others (1989).) Although we do not see this particular quality in Constance, we learn that both Cissy and Alice are involved in the raising of their grandchildren and are prepared to do anything for them. Alice applies a poultice to the younger Michelle's sprained ankle and counsels her about how to help it heal. Beyond that, we see each woman contributing some special skill to the benefit of the group, an illustration of the broader definition of generativity. Alice contributes her practical knowledge of survival in the wilderness handed down from her Mohawk grandmother. Mary offers her knowledge of the birds and plants around them and draws pictures to entertain the others. Cissy adds her child-like exuberance and motivating good-nature. Winnie keeps everyone's spirits up by leading them in songs and teaching them how to stretch and dance gracefully. These shared gifts also help the women's sense of self-esteem, by showing they have something of value to offer to the larger group—something seniors might not ordinarily have an opportunity to do, because of ageism and limited socialization.

Catherine's gift is to share with Michelle, the younger woman, what it is like to be a nun. For the good of the group she spends two days by herself, laboring to repair the bus. When her efforts fail, she offers to walk twenty miles to get help. She tells Mary that even with arthritic feet, she is confident she will complete the arduous trip. Her unflagging optimism and pragmatic attitude make it obvious that self-transcendence is already a reality for Catherine,

having given herself unselfishly to God.

To help cope with their situation and with aging in general, almost all of the women exhibit a sense of humor, an attribute that is important to successful aging (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1963). For example, Mary quips "I'm supposed to take this pill after breakfast, but I guess I can take it now, since it doesn't look like we'll be having any breakfast!" Later, as Mary watches Winnie struggling to put a worm on a makeshift fishing pole, she tells Winnie she is working on a picture of her catching a big fish. Winnie replies, "Well, you might wait a long time." Still later, Alice teases Cissy with "We'd have a lot more berries if half didn't go into your mouth!" And in one memorable scene, Alice, Cissy and Mary ignore all decorum and have a water fight in the shallow part of the lake, acting more like children than 70 or 80 year-olds. This kind of behavior illustrates Chinen's task of "emancipated innocence," being able to shun social convention and appreciate the simpler things in life (1989).

All of the scenes above serve to make each woman seem more real, as do those that are not so light in nature. For example, Beth tells Michelle about the death of her only son and her failure to get an education. She still grieves for both. Cissy tells of her experiences of the bombing in England in World War II and a stroke that left her paralyzed for months. Mary describes the difficulty and pain of hiding her homosexuality in an era when the word "lesbian" was only whispered.

Research has shown that most seniors, when given the opportunity, continue to express their sexuality (National Council on the Aging, 1998). In one scene, the director has Alice, Winnie and Beth discussing romance and

physical attraction. They each describe their early experiences, and then agree that if given another chance at love, they would welcome it. Winnie speaks for them all when she comments, "You don't lose interest just because you're getting older!" In other words, although none of the women have partners at the moment, they would likely be open to a sexual relationship if the opportunity presented itself.

The director of *Strangers* uses a variety of techniques to make the reality of aging and the aged apparent to the viewer. First of all, by casting nonactresses to play the characters, the seven women are seen as more real and in-the-moment. The characters often talk over each other, and repeat themselves, as people do in everyday communication. The "here and now" portrayals of the women make us feel that we are actually part of the group. For example, the story of Cissy having to relearn how to walk and talk after her stroke is all the more real, because Cissy talks and acts with the simplicity of someone who might have actually had a stroke. Some of the women have scratchy or piercing voices, unlike anything you would normally hear coming from an actress's mouth, making the women all the more believable.

The simple story line of the film, being on a journey and running into a serious challenge, is a wonderful metaphor for aging itself, the last developmental stage of life. The circumstances allow the women to step out of their usual social roles and really be themselves, with their respective histories and personalities. The fact that they have to fend for themselves to find food, shelter and safety, provides a showcase for each to share her special skills and wisdom that would remain unrevealed in a more normal situation. Catherine, the nun, demonstrates her mechanical abilities with automobiles, not often

seen in women of her generation. Alice makes a fish trap from a pair of panty hose. Beth and Catherine succeed in catching a bucket of frogs. Constance and Mary figure out how to kill and cook them. They all try their hand at making smoke signals with a blanket and a wood fire. And when one woman is feeling "down" or fearful, someone is always there to comfort her. Besides showing each woman as clever and valuable, the group configuration of seven elders allows us to see more varied manifestations of the issues of aging. The younger woman, Michelle, helps bring the perspective of another generation by questioning and commenting about the older women's lives.

Filming techniques also add to the viewer's appreciation and understanding of aging. The magnificence and beauty of the Canadian wilderness is profound. The lake, often shrouded in mist, other times casting reflections of the verdant mountains, provides an atmosphere both hushed and serene. A myriad of bird calls, including the wistful song of the loon, add a lyrical note of grace to the setting. Compared to the rapid pace of the modern world, everything here is as still as the mirror surface of the lake. This setting can be seen as a metaphor for the slowing down we do as we age. As elders begin to be separated from their earlier, more active lives, they begin to put aside their preoccupation with material possessions and become more aware of the simple things, such as nature, children or a higher power. Constance provides a good example, as she sits for hours watching the lake, straining to hear the calls of the sparrows, drawing strength from the beauty and serenity of the surroundings.

In one scene, all of the women are forced to stay inside the darkened house because of a heavy rain. The camera pans to each woman, one at a time, each

placidly gazing out at the lake with a wistful expression. Each of these images of a dark silhouette against a day-lit window make a perfect portrait—a still life—of aging in a modern, industrialized society. We too often isolate our seniors and sentence them to spend most of their last years alone, doomed to sit and watch the world go by, ostensibly having nowhere to go or anything useful to do. Another poignant scene is created when the camera shows all the women lined up on one side of the lake. All at once they call in unison, "Is anyone there? We're alive!" As their voices echo relentlessly off the deserted lake and mountainside, we are reminded not only of their geographical isolation, but of the fate that modern society has assigned to the aged.

Another valuable film technique in *Strangers* is the use of real life photos of each woman. After a particularly revealing dialogue, the camera focuses on one of the women by slowly projecting four or five snapshots on the screen, as if we were watching a home slide projector. Ranging from child to mature adult, the photos allow us to see the development of each woman and the significant others in her life. This makes the women's reminiscences seem more real and individual as we recognize the people we have been hearing about. The snapshots also give viewers a feeling for the fullness and complexity of each person's life, again making them more real.

Finally, the film's sound track and music score add immeasurably to the theme of the movie. When the women are working together to secure food and shelter, the music is classical and lilting, adding a note of timelessness and dignity to the scenes. Like the women, the music is old, but still resonant; time-worn, yet still beautiful. When the women are able to shed their anxiety

at being stranded long enough to become playful together, the director switches to light-hearted jazz of the 40s, reminding us of a time when these women were just embarking on a lifetime full of promise. Particularly enjoyable are the scenes where the women belt out off-tune renditions of "In the Mood," or "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie", as they play cards together. Even more profound is the director's use of silence, no sound whatsoever, to emphasize the isolation and serenity of the women, the lake, and of the process of aging.

This film may move a bit slowly for some, but viewers will not soon forget the magnificent scenery, the enchanting music, and the surprising women of *Strangers in Good Company.*

Dad

Unlike *Strangers in Good Company*, which utilized short sketches of seven different characters to illustrate the varying aspects and issues of aging, *Dad* uses one couple, Bette and Jake Tremont, and their son John to explore the complexities of old age. *Dad* is a more commercial film, with many big-name actors, and the support of Stephen Spielberg as one of the executive producers.

The story is mostly concerned with the relationship between 76-year-old Jake, played by Jack Lemmon, and his adult son John, portrayed by Ted Danson. There are subplots, however, and we also see how Jake and Bette, played by Olympia Dukakis, relate to each other as an aging couple.

In order to examine the value of *Dad* as a film that is enlightening about aging, it is helpful to first analyze whether Jake and Bette are "real" and typical of aging adults in America. The fact that they are still together after a

long marriage is not atypical, as most seniors are married and living with a spouse in their own home (Atchley, 1997). The fact that they both have been stricken by life-threatening diseases is uncommon, but not unheard of at their ages either, although it is particularly bad luck that both are diagnosed in a short period of time.

When the movie begins, we see that Betty is definitely the stronger of the two, and she has (presumably over a period of time) completely taken over Jake's daily activities to the point of choosing his clothes, helping him dress, and deciding what he will eat and how often. Jake appears to be a victim of "learned helplessness," a syndrome that often occurs in nursing homes and other caregiving situations where older adults are not allowed to make decisions or care for themselves in even the simplest of ways (Atchley, 1997). This illustrates the concept of activity theory in aging, a "use it or lose it" belief that optimal aging includes staying active and resisting the temptation to withdraw from the social world (Havighurst et al., 1963). It is true that Bette has restricted Jake's activities to an absolute minimum, and that beyond the daily grocery trip, they seldom visit anyone but family. While some disengagement from society is common in older people (Streib & Schneider, 1971), Jake's lack of participation is more a result of Bette's strong influence over him, rather than any personal wish to withdraw from life. Bette, on the other hand, seems to have purposely reduced their lives to a minimum of activities and socialization. This is unusual in people living independently and may reflect Bette's wish to have control over as much of hers and Jake's lives as possible. This may be an adaptation (albeit not a positive one) to feelings that she has less control than she did at a younger age when they probably had

a higher income, had more influence in their children's lives, and more prestige in the community.

The film can be divided into three parts for analytical purposes. The first section deals mostly with John's sudden immersion into his father's life, after an absence of over two years, having been busy with his job as an executive for an investment firm. He has been summoned by his sister to help care for Jake while Bette recovers from a heart attack. He is immediately dismayed at how Jake has declined. It is soon evident that Jake has been reduced to doing only the simplest of activities, and though he answers questions lucidly, he seems ready to fall asleep at any moment. Since Bette will be convalescing for some time, John encourages his father to make an effort to begin doing more to care for himself. Jake recognizes the importance of the request and agrees to do what he can.

With a reason to get out of bed in the morning, Jake (rather quickly) begins to regain some of his former abilities and his interest in life. With the help of John and a stack of index cards, he re-learns how to do dishes, wash the clothes, and make his own bed. He learns where his clothes are kept, and soon regains the ability to dress himself. Because he is moving around more, his physical energy is increased, and he gradually becomes more and more active. Eventually, with John's encouragement, he even renews his driving skills so that he can regain his lapsed driving license.

This sequence in the film brings up the importance of self-esteem and competence among older people. As the process of societal disengagement occurs (Cumming & Henry, 1961), that is, as elders are no longer encouraged

to be active or involved in society and are pressed to give up many of their earlier roles, they must find ways to preserve their own self concept. Many use adaptive techniques such as selective perception, that is, comparing themselves to others who they perceive as worse off, or selective interaction, limiting their social world to people who recognize their value because of long association (Heidrich & Ryff, 1993). They also may substitute tasks or hobbies that they are good at for their former paid work, so they can still have a feeling of accomplishment at home. When individuals need to go to nursing homes, where they are bedridden and know no one, they are no longer able to use these adaptive measures. They often suffer a severe decrease in self-esteem (Atchley, 1997). For all intents and purposes, Bette has been providing a similar environment for Jake, by limiting his interactions with others and taking most of his responsibilities and daily tasks away. She does allow him to continue "puttering" in the greenhouse, which Jake seems to be able to do at some basic level, without having to put a lot of thought or energy into it.

By overprotecting and over-caring for Jake, Bette has been able to preserve her own self-esteem. We learn that she has always been a strong, capable woman, and it is likely that her declining importance in other areas of her life, perhaps as a mother, worker, or community leader, have caused her to compensate by becoming Jake's nurse. She can honestly say he could not survive without her. She becomes angry when John visits her in the hospital and tells her Jake is learning to do things for himself again. She would rather Jake heated up frozen packets of her cooking than to try making something new of his own. All she wants is for John to "keep him alive until I get home," a

telling phrase that indicates that her well-being is more dependent on determining the course of Jake's life than her own.

Keeping their lives to a strict routine is another adaptive skill that Bette uses to excess. Normally, continuity in activities and environments can be helpful in compensating for slower reflexes and disabilities that sometimes accompany aging, because it adds the element of practice and familiarity to activities that might be more difficult or even dangerous (due to poor vision or hearing, for example) (Atchley, 1989). However, Bette seems to have filtered out almost all new experiences from their lives. This includes foregoing social events anymore. This sort of differential disengagement from society is typical to some degree in older people; that is, due to the loss of earlier roles, they redistribute their time, and select what activities seem most comfortable for them (Streib & Schneider, 1971). This may be due solely to loss of roles, or it may be influenced by a decline in physical and mental abilities. In the Tremonts' case, Bette has refused to drive with Jake anymore (she gets too nervous), so he has allowed his license to lapse. Consequently, she does the driving, allowing her to control where they go (and how fast), and this is generally no further than the grocery store.

In the second section of the film, Jake is hospitalized for a bladder dysfunction that may be cancerous. Bette has just recently come home from the hospital herself, so John decides to stay and help out as long as necessary. By now, he has come to realize that this may be the last chance he has to really get to know his father. One thing he has learned is that Jake is terrified of the word "cancer" and has lost his brother to it. John asks the doctor to hold off mentioning the cancer threat to Jake until after the exploratory surgery.

After the operation, the doctor tells John that there was a cancerous tumor, but that he thinks he was able to remove all of it. However, John soon finds that something is terribly wrong with Jake. He is hallucinating and does not appear to know who members of the family are. When John confronts the doctor about this, he tells him that Jake may be having a temporary form of "senility" and that he can do nothing else for him, except offer "custodial" care, which can be had in a nursing home. He also admits that he told Jake he had cancer. John becomes furious, sure that the doctor's actions caused Jake to go into shock. In a fit of rage he actually carries Jake out of the hospital like a child, and takes him home to care for him alone.

This poignant scene in *Dad* points out a common problem of aging adults and their adult children who must deal with medical personnel who have no special training for the treatment of older adults and their special needs. Jake's doctor is only trained in cancer treatment, and for the time being, he has done what he can. He dismisses the "senility" (a useless term) as inevitable and not within his realm. Actually, there are several types of delirium and dementia, some are reversible, and many can be helped by medication or special counseling (Butler, Lewis, & Sutherland, 1998). He implies that because of Jake's age, he does not warrant any more tests or special care other than nursing home care. Though attitudes are changing, this kind of ageism in the medical profession is still rampant. Untrained in geriatrics and the many manifestations of dementia and delirium, many doctors take a "wait and see" approach and do nothing, when the patient could be getting better. John's reaction of taking Jake home to care for him himself seems irrational,

but it serves to illustrate the frustration that many adult children face when trying to deal with the medical establishment, which has a severe shortage of trained geriatricians. In addition to inadequate training, doctors often exhibit countertransference, that is, they allow their own beliefs and preconceptions about older people to influence their decisions about the patient's treatment (Butler, et al., 1998). When an administrator tells John he knows how difficult it is to accept what it means to have a parent get old, he replies angrily, "'To be old' means most people would rather you were dead," obviously referring to the attitude of his father's physician.

John learns quickly that he cannot care for Jake himself, and after a particularly frightening experience for both of them, Jake slips into a coma. He is taken back to the hospital, where John gets a different physician. With the doctor's approval, John moves into his dad's hospital room and spends the next several weeks sitting by his father's side, willing him to wake up. Finally, Jake miraculously comes back to life, seemingly a different man. He regales the hospital personnel with jokes and declares that he wants some "real food." The doctor suggests that all of the positive love and energy that John has brought to the room may have been as important in bringing Jake back as the intravenous medications. The compassion and empathy of this doctor for elders and their adult children has made a difficult situation a little easier for John and the family.

The last section of the film deals with Jake's surprising new zest and energy for life, and how it affects his relationship with Bette. For instructive purposes, Jake's new behavior illustrates several of Chinen's tasks of the "journey

beyond the self" (1989, p.146). First, he rejects Bette's former daily routine of clipping coupons and staring at the television for an active life of learning new things and becoming reacquainted with former pleasures. Apparently he has reviewed his former life and found it lacking. He goes to the flea market and buys costumes for himself , John, and grandson Billy, so that they can put on a "show" for the rest of the family. He plans to go to some baseball games and begins to practice golf putting in the yard. He digs out his old fishing gear and cleans it up. This behavior suggests that Jake is not only more vigorous about life, but he is turning away from his previously more practical nature of being careful, frugal, and observing the social conventions of the "old." With a new wisdom about what matters in life, he takes delight in the simple pleasures of being alive. He does not care that he may look foolish or that he may hurt himself.

Next, Jake begins his journey of self-transcendence and generativity, giving up his own needs to do whatever it takes to help others and make them happy. He visits his neighbors, who hardly know him, and offers to care for their children. He begins with one child and eventually has half a dozen kids coming to his door for fun and games. He decides to research something about a different country every day, and he is fascinated by all the things he can still learn. With a new sense of wonder, of emancipated innocence, everything seems exciting and beautiful to him.

Bette, on the other hand, is having a difficult time keeping up with Jake. He has a renewed interest in sex that she finds disconcerting, and she worries that he will hurt himself with all the new activities he is doing. She realizes that she

has very little control over his life (or hers) anymore, and she does not like it. Finally, during a family get-together for "Japan night," she blows up in frustration. She declares that Jake has gone crazy since he came out of the coma. Wanting to defend his father, John speaks harshly to Bette.

This discord makes Jake extremely upset, because what he wants is for "everybody to love each other." While he has managed in a very short time to become "enlightened" about what is important in life, Bette is frightened by the stranger he has become. After the dinner she asks him if it was really so bad being with her all those years. He replies, "I just want to remember the dreams we had together. I want to dance with you again before I die." Bette tells him not to talk about dying, but he says, "It's okay. We're all going to die someday." This scene illustrates that Jake has mastered Erikson's task of integrity. He is now at peace with his life as it was and has transcended the fear most of us have of death. The two dance together in the silent greenhouse, and Bette seems to finally accept that she will not be getting her old husband back.

Soon after, tests reveal that Jake's cancer has returned. He only has a few months to live, but he spends it trying to get as close as he can to those around him. Because of Jake's efforts to bring the family closer together, John realizes there is unfinished business with his son Billy, who has been living apart with his mother for many years. He tells Billy that the most important thing he has learned from Jake is to be forgiving. After Jake's death, John and Billy have a private memorial for him in the greenhouse. They dress up in costumes and have a ceremony over his plants. This touching scene illustrates that Jake fulfilled the final task of maturity by becoming mediator

to the next generations, influencing both John and Billy to be more honest, more spontaneous, and more loving.

Dad has no dazzling scenery or symbolic imagery to make us more aware of the aging process. However, the director cast two incredibly talented and versatile actors to play Jake and Bette. Lemmon's ability to instill in his character both wisdom and a childish delight in life is inspiring. Dukakis' skill at projecting the anger, fear, and guilt that many older adults must face makes the movie seem that more realistic. Jake and Bette are two very real and complex elders.

Danson offers a convincing portrayal of the adult child caregiver, having to walk the fine line between being son and nurse to his father, trying to watch out for Jake's health without smothering his independence, while dealing with guilt about not having spent more time with Jake during his elder years. When Jake disappears from his bed at one point, we see the desperate fear in John's eyes—the knowledge that he is responsible for the life of another human being, and that he may have failed.

The director also uses humor to keep the trials and challenges of the film from becoming too overwhelming. For example, when John is helping Jake re-learn how to do chores around the house, they have a difficult time deciding what to do with a white and striped shirt—should it go in the colored or the white wash? In the next scene we see the two exiting a dry cleaner shop, with John proclaiming, "See? How hard was that?" Later, after Jake has awakened from the coma a new man, we see him get down on his stomach on the living room floor and begin making strange noises. To Bette's inquiry, "What on

earth are you doing?" he replies, "I just wanted to see if I could still do a pushup!" Lemmon's natural ability for slapstick and the use of his body for comic relief makes this scene doubly memorable.

Dad includes one surprising scene that is stereotypical and insensitive of older adults. However, it provides a good example of how film-makers use a stereotype to make people laugh, while at the same time convincing viewers that the myth they had heard before must actually be true. John takes Jake to a bingo game, something he and Bette used to enjoy but had stopped doing several years before. Once there, an older couple approaches them, claiming to remember Jake from previous occasions. They proceed to tell him that all the people at a particular table have died, one by one. Having imparted this information they apparently have nothing more to talk about and depart, with a "Nice to see you again." This scene reinforces the myth that old people talk only about dying and have nothing else interesting to say. It also makes older people look insensitive to the value of others, as if just by virtue of the fact that the people have died makes their former lives irrelevant. This is an unfortunate scene, yet many people will find themselves laughing at it.

The director uses another gimmick that this writer feels should have been left out. Throughout the movie Jake intermittently has dreams and flashbacks that he is a younger man with a family living on a farm. He feels that these are true memories. Eventually, John takes him to a psychiatrist who says Jake invented this second life in a schizophrenic act of self-preservation to counteract the repressed, unhappy life he has experienced with Bette. This subplot was wholly unnecessary, difficult to believe, and serves

only to confuse the viewers for three-quarters of the movie. Perhaps the producers thought that people would not go to a film about aging unless it had some kind of gimmick.

All and all, however, *Dad* is well worth viewing. It is an invaluable aid to helping people see older adults as real, though perhaps flawed, individuals. The task of reaching filial maturity for adult children is also aptly illustrated. Viewers are left with an incredible sense of appreciation for the special relationship that is possible with an aging, dying parent, and a real sense of loss at the passing of a unique, vibrant man.

Grumpy Old Men

As the title suggests, *Grumpy Old Men* is a comedy about two older men who have been bickering for fifty years. It was an unexpected box office success in 1993, certainly due in part to the superb acting and general loveability of its two stars, Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon. Its value for the study of gerontology comes from its ground breaking treatment of sex and romance in the elder years.

The story is about the never ending rivalry and resentment between Max Goldman (Matthau) and John Gustafson (Lemmon), who have been next door neighbors in a small town in Minnesota since childhood. Apparently, Max has never forgiven John for "taking away" his first love, even though, according to John, she was "no catch" and Max ended up with someone better. Both of them are in their late sixties, have been widowers for some years, and except for their love of ice fishing, their chief enjoyment in life seems to be playing practical jokes on each other. In between, they watch TV and call each other

names, like "moron" and "putz."

Everything changes when fiery, red-headed Ariel moves in across the street. Played by Ann-Margaret, the fifty-ish, free-living university professor from California is looking for fun and excitement. She sends out signals to both John and Max, but soon we see that she is most attracted to John. This causes more conflict between the two men, with Max blaming John for committing the same offence as fifty years earlier. When he derides John for leading Ariel on, pointing out that he has nothing to offer her, John has second thoughts about his exciting new relationship. He has recently learned that because of an innocent mistake in his taxes years ago, he is about to lose everything he has to the IRS. Realizing that Max is lonely, and that he (John) really doesn't have much to offer Ariel, he tells her she is too much for him and he no longer wants to see her. Stricken, she leaves with hurt feelings. She soon takes up with Max, who is more than willing to share the fun, but viewers see from her hidden glances that she is really still in love with John.

When Christmas rolls around, John is increasingly depressed that he let Ariel "get away." In a fit of anger, he lets Max know that it was he who sent Ariel away, not that she left him for Max. He is so unhappy and distressed he suffers a heart attack. While John is lying in the hospital, Max realizes he really cares for his "friend," even if they've never gotten along the way buddies are supposed to. He "does the right thing" and tells Ariel that John is really in love with her, despite what he said. She goes to John in the hospital and vows to wait for him until he recovers. The next scene is of the wedding ceremony, with Max giving John the deed to his house (which Max has saved from

foreclosure with the help of his lawyer-son) as a wedding present. The viewers get a typical, Hollywood-style ending.

Max and John can be considered not so typical of American men over 65, since three-quarters are married, and only 10 per cent are widowed (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1992). However, they do live in a small town where social contacts are limited, and we don't know exactly how long they have been widowers, so their circumstances are plausible. (And, of course, one of them is married by the end of the film.) The two are independent and living in their own homes, very typical of elders in their sixties (Atchley, 1997). Like most seniors their age, they have minor complaints, but no serious disabilities (Freedman & Soldo, 1994), and are strong enough to shovel the snow off their sidewalks.

Since Max and John live next door to each other, viewers can see easily that the adaptive skills they have developed over the years are quite similar. To compensate for the loss of their wives, they have learned to do the domestic chores for themselves. For recreation, they both love to ice fish and both have fishing shanties at the pond. They both practice differential disengagement (Streib & Schneider, 1971), that is, withdrawing from some of their earlier social roles and activities, but still staying marginally active. They associate mostly with other fishermen and spend most nights at home alone in front of their respective televisions. However, like a majority of seniors, they both have family nearby that they see often (Frankel & DeWit, 1989). Max has a son living in town, and John has a daughter and granddaughter who visit him often from out of town, not to mention Pop, his 94-year-old father who lives independently, close by.

Much of the time, the two neighbors seem to keep their minds occupied by dreaming up schemes to make the other miserable. These practical jokes can be seen as examples of an adaptive skill for dealing with boredom and inactivity. For example, when Max becomes tired of what's on TV, he figures out how to aim his remote control into John's living room so that he can change the stations at the most critical time, such as during the winning number announcements for the state lottery. Another time, John enjoys watching Max's car go weaving down the street as he searches through the rubbish for the source of the horrendous smell (a dead fish placed in the back seat earlier by John). Besides keeping them busy, the practical jokes seem to give the men a feeling of heightened self-esteem as each one manages to outdo the other.

Like most older adults, John and Max are dealing with many losses. There is the loss of their wives, the recent loss of their careers to retirement, and the loss of many mutual friends. They both fear the spectre of a slow decline before death and agree (maybe the only thing they agree on) that to be hit by a truck and killed instantly is the best way to go. They both deal with the rising cost of food, drugs and worms (for fishing), having to subsist on a fixed income. Each of them has a physical complaint, Max mentions lumbago and John, his sciatica.

One of the best scenes of *Grumpy Old Men* shows the two men (unbeknownst to the other) primping to present themselves at Ariel's door. Just like teenagers, they try on several different outfits, practice their "lines," and bring out the cologne and aftershave. They are obviously not too old to be smitten or sexually attracted to a younger woman. In fact, when a third man gains first entrance to her abode, the two rush over the next morning to hear

from the fellow about the supposed sexual escapade. Then after John becomes the lucky one to share Ariel's bed, viewers are treated to a priceless scene, as only Lemmon can do it, as he skids across the floor in his undershorts, does a little dance, then throws two eggs over his shoulder and into the pan—a perfect performance of someone who just had sex for the first time in fifteen years. As was discussed earlier, seniors still enjoy sex and 61 per cent of senior men are sexually active, although ageism often makes it difficult for single elders to act on this natural drive (National Council on the Aging, 1998). It is heartening to see that the producer took the chance to illustrate this truth, even if he had to choose the female love interest to be a red-headed bombshell that looks forty.

The film's producer, however, stoops to the use of the weary stereotype of the "dirty old man," in the character of John's father, Pop, (played by Burgess Meredith) who keeps talking about wanting to "mount" someone. He is full of profanity, swigs beer and smokes cigarettes constantly, and never stops talking about sex to any woman with whom he comes in contact. Viewers are supposed to forgive this behavior because, one, he's very old (ninety-four) and probably "senile," and two, it's in the name of comic relief. Pop does get some of the best laughs, especially from the young people, who probably think that it is funny to drink a lot and smoke incessantly and talk about sex when (they believe) you could not possibly follow through. However, just as drunkenness and excessive smoking in films has come under attack in recent years, perhaps this sort of characterization of older adults will also some day meet with disapproval by enough film-goers to make it no longer profitable to include.

A prominent theme of the film is that one must seize the moment and take

advantage of opportunity, while there is still time. When John and Max tell their friend Chuck about the gorgeous new neighbor across the street, he calls them "chicken" for not rushing over to meet her. The next day, after Chuck has beaten them to the punch, he tells them that meeting Ariel was like an "awakening," that it reminded him that he was still alive, "full of energy, love, and passion." The next night, Chuck dies in his sleep. In another scene, when John is regretting his decision not to see Ariel anymore, he tells his daughter that if she has the opportunity to be happy, she should grab it. "The worst thing is to regret the risks you didn't take," he says.

Although many might believe that risk-taking is a behavior only for the young, it actually becomes even more important during later stages of life. Elders may realize that they have only a limited time left to do what they want to do, and may be more apt to take risks to experience these adventures. This is especially true now that people are reaching retirement age and being told they may have another thirty years to live. This new longevity means a new kind of freedom, beyond the restraints of child-rearing, career, or social convention. Risk-taking for elders, however, may be more measured and rational than it was at thirty. With the wisdom of age, seniors have less to prove, and are less interested in impressing people. As Betty Friedan states in *The Fountain of Age* (1993), it is liberating to realize that qualities such as "wisdom born of experience, and freedom from youthful, compulsive competition, can more than compensate for whatever losses of muscle power or memory also come with age" (p. 326). At the same time, Friedan says, elders are more apt to know what their true limits are and are free to choose

not to participate if they so choose. Certainly, it is not easy for anyone to take risks, but as Ariel points out to John in one scene, it is better to *experience* life than to watch it on television.

Related to the need to take chances is the importance of social activity and support in later life. Research studies have shown a strong positive correlation between social roles and activities and life satisfaction (Granick & Patterson, 1971). Ariel already seems to know the value of social activity and adventure, as she snowmobiles around the town at breakneck speeds, or introduces herself to practically every available male in the village. Admittedly, Ariel is not yet an elder, but it is hard to believe that a decade will make much difference. She has already retired from a successful academic career and adapted to being a widow. Perhaps she is lucky that she has been presented with the freedom of the last stage of life earlier than most, while her self-esteem and sense of self-reliance are still unmarred by ageism.

When John decides to stop seeing Ariel, his self-esteem is at a precarious level. He is about to lose his house and his pension, he has not worked (for pay) for several years, and certainly he is a lot older than she is. What can he offer a vibrant, adventurous soul like Ariel? But as his disappointment and resentment grow, he realizes that the loneliness he feels is not worth the saving of pride that turning away from Ariel gave him. Given a second chance, he gladly gives up his worry about finances or looking foolish, in favor of romance and companionship.

In fact, "retirement marriages" after 65 are quite common among divorced and widowed men. Fifty per cent of widowers remarry within ten years of their

wives' deaths (Burch, 1990). But, as we have seen with John and Max, it is not easy in the face of ageism to put one's self-esteem on the line, and opportunities for socialization are not always plentiful. It is encouraging to see that as John and Ariel are being whisked away on their honeymoon, that instead of returning to his television, Max is on his way to a dance at a Daughters of the American Revolution gathering. This hints that he has a newfound sense of self-esteem from Ariel's attention and is willing to take some risks that he was not willing to take before.

As with *Dad*, the producers of *Grumpy Old Men*, chose two veteran actors to portray the lead characters. It is doubtful that two less popular or less recognizable seniors would have been accepted so easily as objects of romance by a '50 something' femme fatale. Since few people do not know the two men from years of humorous and loveable portrayals in movies and television, it is an easy step to imagining them (and other senior men) as worthy of attention by a younger woman. In addition, the talents of the two men in projecting humor also make the characters seem more real and more deserving of our empathy. The fact that the IRS is literally knocking on John's door is made more palatable by the comic image of Lemmon sneaking out the upstairs window and sliding down the snow-packed roof to the ground below. The possibility that the two men might come to violence over the attentions of a woman are tempered by the memorable scene in which John struggles to disarm Max of a frozen fish he is trying desperately to stab him with. In many of the scenes it is obvious that the two actors are having a good time, and this adds to the audience's awareness that most seniors do actually have fun and laugh a lot.

The directors use music to enhance the humor in the film. For example, when Max gets close to uncovering the dead fish John has put in his car, the theme from *Jaws* is played. When the two are primping for their first appearance at Ariel's door, the background music is a rock and roll song, the lyrics being "I'mmmm too sexy for my hat, too sexy for my...." And to set the stage for the relentless mounds of Minnesota snow, they play "We're Having a Heat Wave" during the opening credits.

While it is true that *Grumpy Old Men* is not rich in symbolism or artistic cinematography, its importance lies in its ability to show aging in a humorous, hopeful, and romantic light—three adjectives not often associated with growing old by the viewing audience.

Age Old Friends

Age Old Friends is quite different from the earlier film selections, in that the two main characters are no longer living independently and reside in a retirement home. It is a story of two friends waging a war against two very real foes, the loss of mental and physical capacity. Of all the films, *Age Old Friends* is the hardest to view without the shedding of some tears, but at the same time, it does offer hope.

The story is told through the eyes of John Cooper (played by veteran actor Hume Cronyn), who has been living at Twin Pines Retirement Home for four years. He has a comfortable, well-decorated apartment, where he receives meals, domestic service and monitoring of his medications. He and his friend Michael Aylott (portrayed by Vincent Gardenia) spend hours playing chess,

reciting New York Giants team players, and dreaming up imaginary "escape" plans, where they will depart the home forever and live able-bodied in Switzerland for the rest of their days. Cooper finds it hard to get around anymore and so never leaves his room, but Aylott takes a daily walk to town to get candy. Lately, however, Aylott has been forgetting things and it worries him. Cooper is also upset, because even though his daughter and son-in-law visit him regularly, they have suddenly stopped bringing their son Gary, the one person Cooper especially looks forward to seeing. The story revolves around Cooper's struggle with his friend's memory loss and confusion, his troubled relationship with his daughter, and his own increasing physical frailty.

Cooper and Aylott can be considered atypical of most elders, since 95 per cent live in the community at large (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). However, as a person ages, the likelihood of having a disability which requires help in daily activities increases. It is never stated how old Cooper is, but he appears to be at least 75 or older. His decision to come to the home was influenced by the death of his wife and a desire to be cared for by persons he could complain to (because he pays them), rather than by his daughter, who he feels he would have to be nice to. In fact, most elders who need help with daily activities and are without a spouse, are cared for by an adult daughter (Coward et al., 1992). Aylott is only 71, but has no family and has apparently come to the home to escape loneliness, or perhaps for financial reasons. Aylott is again atypical of most seniors who have, as Cooper does, some family within an hour or two's driving distance (Frankel & DeWit, 1989). So while the two men represent a very small minority of seniors, it is helpful to examine how they

cope and adapt to the retirement home experience.

Cooper has disabling arthritis (arthritis affects one half of elders over 75, but is not always disabling) (Adams & Benson, 1991), but he is able to compensate somewhat with a cane. Aylott seems to be experiencing some kind of dementia, or early stages of Alzheimer's disease, never an easy diagnosis to make. What may look like Alzheimer's can easily be reversible dementia brought on by a variety of treatable causes, such as medications, infections, or vitamin deficiency (Butler, et al., 1998). As previously mentioned, only 5 per cent of elders do develop Alzheimer's (although, the percentage rises sharply for those over 85) (Sunderland et al., 1995), so it is possible Aylott will be lucky.

The *fear* of developing Alzheimer's is not rare in elders. According to Rowe and Kahn (1998) of the MacArthur Foundation Study on Successful Aging, most seniors worry excessively about the eventual loss of cognitive ability, even though most will retain their mental sharpness and independence into their 80s. Cooper and Aylott, however, being in a home where the frail are congregated, must endure the daily reminder of Alzheimer's terrible toll. They call the stricken "zombies," and lament that the worst part of being one is not knowing it. The fear and anxiety for Aylott is made worse by the callousness of the resident physician. He brushes off Aylott's concern with a statement about it being natural to forget things as you get older, obviously not interested in something he believes he cannot fix. Sadly, this perception of aging as an inevitable and acceptable decline into disability still exists in many retirement homes, hospitals, and in the medical profession. Cooper is asked by Aylott to tell him truthfully if he is slipping mentally, and so reluctantly, he does. He

knows it is better to be truthful than to treat Aylott as if his perceptions do not matter.

Since *Age Old Friends* was made in 1989 and was based on a play written earlier, we can be thankful that in the last decade many advances have been made in the diagnosis and treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia which mimic it. Today, it is more likely that Aylott would be subjected to a variety of screening tests and given medications and counseling on how best to face the condition, whether it be Alzheimer's or some other disorder (Butler, et al., 1998).

Cooper has his own demons to deal with, in particular his decreasing mobility and the loss of his pride as an able-bodied, capable man. These challenges are compounded by the loneliness and grief he feels for the death of his adored wife of over forty years. Even though she has been gone for four years, he confesses to thinking of her every day. He copes with these losses by putting on a show of sarcasm and indifference for the world around him, including his daughter. There are those who see through his performance, however, such as the young and attractive nurse, Wilson, and the African American housekeeper, Baker. He teases the nurse unmercifully, claiming to dream about her in the nude, and wondering how far up her stockings go. When she replies that he is nothing but a "dirty old man," he wonders out loud, "when did 'old' become synonymous with 'dirty'?"

Cooper's characterization borders on the stereotypical. He has similarities to the "irascible old storekeeper" or the "sex-crazed grandpa." But his character is redeemed by the sensitivity he shows to his friend Aylott and his

obvious fondness for Wilson. She realizes that his brash and grouchy manner is actually a defense against feeling too much, or allowing people to get too close. She encourages him to get out of his room more, as Aylott does. But Cooper is adamant that he does want to have another fall in public, as the last one left him "stranded like a beached whale," with everyone staring. Indeed, falls are another legitimate fear of elders, as they are the leading cause of accidental death among people 75 and over (Hornbrook, Stevens, Wingfield, Hollis, Greenlick, & Ory, 1994). Cooper hides his fear behind another joke about how only seniors can "have a fall," whereas other people "fall down."

Cooper has chosen to retreat from the rest of the world, depending on Aylott and Wilson to keep him up to date on what goes on outside his room. His pride and fear keep him from going out, even though with the aid of his cane and a friend to lean on, he could descend the stairs to the common rooms, or go for a walk. Cooper has taken disengagement to extremes, an adaptive skill which helps seniors deal with the loss of some functions (Streib & Schneider, 1971). As we have seen with Jake Tremont and John Gustafson, it is important to stay active, take some risk, and be socially involved to combat boredom and depression. Cooper seems too paralyzed by fear to do this.

On the other hand, Cooper uses his intelligence and creativity to counteract the boredom of his self-imposed isolation. He carries on a witty and creative string of jokes and caustic criticism with anyone who will listen to him, and when no one is around he sketches drawings of the people who come into his room. He and Aylott analyze the platitudes of the resident doctor, and conjecture on what he is really thinking. Cooper is so in tune with the rhythm

and routine of the home that even from his room he immediately knows when something has changed. After all, he tells Wilson, "There is no such thing as something that is 'a little unusual,'" in a place where the slightest deviation is seen as a serious breach of protocol. He plays chess with Aylott, and when he loses, he studies his mistakes for future reference. And, of course, the two spend hours trying to recall all nine players of the Giants' team of 1937. When Wilson downplays the importance of his repeating a story he has told her before, he replies, "Of course, it matters. My mind is all I have left, the rest of me doesn't work!" Cooper has learned to compensate for his decrease in mobility by constantly exercising his mind.

While viewers are never told exactly what Cooper used to do for a living, it is clear that he is a highly educated man by his extensive vocabulary and references to literary works. As longitudinal studies have shown, most intelligence remains intact for a person throughout old age (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), in spite of the myth that we must lose brain cells and become more "simple-minded" as we age. An exception is difficulty with explicit memory, that is, short-term memory involving failure to be able to recall a specific name, number or word on demand. Older adults may also take more time to reach the same conclusions or answers than a younger person might take, but neither of these difficulties affect the elder's ability to lead a functional, happy life. "Working memory," which allows us to remember the learned routines that are necessary for daily living, is no different than for young people (Herzog & Rodgers, 1989).

Age Old Friends is a good film for examining intergenerational issues, and

the dynamics of adult children caring for their parents. As seniors begin to suffer losses, they often turn to family for support and sympathy. This help may be offered generously for awhile, until other life demands placed on the adult children may become overwhelming. As help is given less frequently or with resentment, the elder feels humiliation and guilt about being a burden. This may lead to anger and criticism of the children, who are torn between their sense of duty to their parents and the demands of their children or working lives (Finkel, 1980). Cooper and his daughter Julia are representative examples of this frustrating cycle of emotions. Julia and her husband drive a couple hours every fourth Sunday in order to visit with Cooper. Even though father and daughter care for each other, they seldom find anything civil to talk about, with Cooper refusing to let down his facade of the caustic, tough guy for even a moment. Julia accuses him of never being nice to them, when, after all, they do make the trip (with all the traffic) just to see him. He retorts that she might as well not bother, as they only stay a few minutes and wear their "martyred expressions" the entire time they are there.

The only saving grace to this routine is Gary, Julia's teenage son, whom Cooper truly enjoys seeing, because, like himself, "he has a little bit of the devil in him." Lately, however, Gary has stopped coming to visit because he has begun to have nightmares about death and dying. Julia blames Cooper for this, since all he ever talks about is the neighbor who just passed away or has been fitted with a urine bag—what she calls "all the mess and decay" of dying. She accuses him of never telling them about how he really feels, and what his world is like. His response, of course, is that death and urine bags *are* his life, and that she doesn't really want to know what he is feeling. Later, when Julia

and Cooper are alone, she admits that what hurts the most is that he doesn't seem to need her. He feels remorse and admits that putting up a front has become a habit for him, left over from being told all his life that "big boys don't cry." In reality, he says, once in awhile he would like a little sympathy for his pain. He would like to be able to say, "I'm frightened at what lies ahead," but he is afraid to sound like one of those elders who constantly complains. So, instead he puts on the act.

Encouraged by his opening up, Julia asks him to rethink her earlier offer to come live with them. He realizes he is tempted, even though he is sure that they would be on each other's nerves all the time. He promises to consider the offer. It is likely that if Cooper were to agree, however, there would indeed follow another cycle of frustration, anger, and resentment, as Cooper feels more and more of a burden, and Julia finds it harder and harder to deal with the extra needs he imposes upon her. Thus, viewers see a classic example of the difficulty of intergenerational relationships when elderly parents need assistance and adult children want to help.

Cooper is not sure there is anything keeping him at the home any longer, as Wilson tells him she is leaving and Aylott is becoming more and more confused. Then one day, Aylott does not show up for his customary visit. Cooper is upset and worried, knowing that Aylott got lost on an earlier walk and was almost run down by a car. With some trepidation he steels his courage, takes his cane, and ventures outside the home in search of his friend. As he is laboriously making his way down the driveway, Aylott is returned by a good samaritan. Relieved that Aylott is all right, he is upset to hear that he was

lost again. Later, when Aylott comes to visit, he becomes more confused than ever, and at one point, does not recognize who Cooper is. Cooper is horrified and exclaims "Aylott, don't leave me." He realizes that he is not ready to give up his friend without a fight. He forces him to focus his attention, and begins to quiz him on the members of the Giants team. Gradually, Aylott seems to come back, and he is himself again. Cooper realizes that to leave Aylott now would be a disservice to them both, and that he must stay at the home and help him however he can.

Cooper has realized the powerful value of a close friend. As has been discussed, friends, and a social support system, can make the difference between successful aging and a life of despair. Indeed it is a factor in the difference between longevity and an early death. That is, people who have fewer and weaker social relationships have two to four times the risk of death as those who have some support from family or loved ones (Bosworth & Schaie, 1997). In Cooper's case, Aylott's support comes in the form of mutual affection, trust, respect, and a feeling of empathy. The two discuss the daily machinations of the home and its personnel, what is in the news, Aylott's trips outside and, of course, their "escape plan." Faced with the possibility that some of these shared experiences will disappear, Cooper is motivated to work harder at his relationship with Aylott, to cherish what time they have left together.

And so, in the last scene of *Age Old Friends*, viewers see Cooper actually venturing outside with Aylott, each supporting the other, because, as he says, "If I fall, you fall with me." Walking together to town not only keeps Aylott

from getting lost, but gives Cooper an opportunity to see something outside the limited environment of the home and to gain more confidence in his mobility. For the first time in months, Cooper has taken the first step to regaining some control in his life. This type of self-efficacy is valuable in itself. A major outcome of the MacArthur Foundation study was the validation that a person's *belief* in his ability to handle various life circumstances helps to maintain mental stability and confidence into old age (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Because of Cooper's love and need for his friend, he has been motivated to go beyond his pride and his fear of falling, in order to take back control of his and Aylott's future together, if only for a short time. Herein lies the hope and encouragement of the two men's struggle with their enemies, mental and physical incapacity.

The humor in *Age Old Friends* helps keep the circumstances of the retirement home from becoming too depressing and helps illustrate how elders cope. For example, Cooper notes that each month his daughter and son-in-law arrive a little bit later in the day. Eventually, he muses, they will just wave hello as they drive by. Later, Cooper "has a fall," and his son-in-law, offering to help him up, asks where he would like to go. "Casablanca," he replies. Then, as Peter cautiously helps him to the chair, he says, "I'd like to get there before the end of the week, if you don't mind," in an obvious attempt to deflect attention from his helpless circumstances.

At the beginning of the film and at various times throughout, the director uses a "voiceover" narrative of Cooper's thoughts. This technique helps us have more empathy and brings us closer to Cooper's reality, as if we were "reading" his mind. At one point, he is worrying about his friend's loss of mental

stability, but he also realizes with alarm that he does not want to see Aylott, that is, not if he is not his usual self. Hearing Cooper's conflicting emotions brings us that much closer to the reality of the situation. Another time, he sees another resident go into the garden fountain, fully clothed, and laments that the man is one more casualty of the "war." For a moment, the defenses are down, and we not only see his horrified expression, but hear the utter dread in his "inner" voice.

Another interesting technique is used at the beginning of the film. A delivery truck drives up to the closed gates of the home, and viewers see a close-up of the iron bars. Then Cooper is seen looking through the slats of the blinds in his room at the truck outside, as he begins to talk about how most of the people there are just trying to escape. The bars on the gate, and the slats on the window both create a feeling of imprisonment, as if Cooper is being held against his will from fully engaging with the rest of the world. Like the women of *Strangers in Good Company*, he is isolated from the rest of society by the restraints that aging and ageism impose on individuals and by the confinement he has imposed upon himself. It is fitting that the last scene of the movie shows Aylott and Cooper leaving the grounds of the retirement home, to mix with the mainstream, at least temporarily.

Age Old Friends has some difficult moments, but Cronyn's excellent performance and witty repartee keeps the movie from becoming maudlin. As a teaching tool, it would be best used toward the end of a course or with other more upbeat films, lest it reinforce the myth of aging as inevitable decline (Patchner, 1986). Care should be taken to help students and viewers find the

positive aspects of the film, such as the value of late life friendships and the remarkable spirit of elders who are confronted with multiple losses.

I'm Not Rappaport

The last selection, *I'm Not Rappaport,* deals with aging in an urban setting, New York City. However, most of the action takes place within Central Park, which serves as a kind of microcosm of our society and its treatment of the aged. Paradoxically, it also serves as a metaphor for a place that is outside the mainstream, outside modern American society, where everything moves at a little slower pace. A place where what you "do" (your job) is not so important; where an elder can fade into the background without being noticed or asked to "move along," at least until after dark.

The main characters of the film are Nat and Midge, two eighty-something seniors who meet on a park bench. Portrayed by Walter Matthau, Nat is a vibrant, verbose, socially active Jewish man, with a penchant for stretching the truth. He loves to make up tales in which he is the central, activist hero, protector of the oppressed, and speaker for those who cannot speak. After being one person for eighty years, he says, he has decided to be 100 different people for the remainder. His way of coping with aging is to make sure people do not forget he is there, by being loud, persistent and significant. You cannot ignore him. Midge is pretty sure that the stories Nat has been telling him for the past several days are lies, but the latter is so good at it, so eloquent and descriptive in his use of detail, that he is never quite sure.

By contrast, Midge, portrayed by Ossie Davis, has taken a stance of

keeping quiet and out of the way. By staying mostly in the basement of the apartment building where he has been working as super for forty-two years, he has endeavored to be invisible, and thus safe. As an African American he has been taught to obey the boss and appreciate the opportunity to put in a good day's work. For years he has not asked for a raise or complained about his living quarters in the basement, presumably substandard to those above. He is proud that he has mastered the mechanical intricacies of the building's monstrous boiler, knowing it like the back of his hand, and thankful that he has been allowed to keep the job for so long. He much prefers to sit alone in the park, pretending to read the paper, than to initiate any conversations or appear to be "looking for trouble."

Things start to come apart for Midge, however, when he is informed by his building's homeowners committee that they will be modernizing the heating and cooling system, and that he will be "let go" with a modest severance pay. In other words, he is no longer needed. Coincidentally, he has just met Nat. Against his better judgment, he allows Nat to masquerade as his union representative, to try to save his job, or at the least, his home in the basement. But Nat doesn't stop with this crusade. He also gets Midge involved in some dangerous escapades, endeavoring to stand up to a deviant bully in the park, and trying to get Laurie, a young artist who visits the park regularly, out of trouble with a drug dealer. The adventures the two get into may not be typical of most seniors, but they are certainly entertaining and revealing of the issues of seniors being seen as helpless and inconsequential.

Like John Gustafson and Max Goldman of *Grumpy Old Men*, Nat and

Midge are somewhat atypical to be unmarried and living alone, but this may be more by choice than by lack of opportunity. Midge, apparently, has had too many wives, and Nat seems to not want to spoil the memory of his one and only, beloved wife. However, they are typical of most elders, particularly the "old-old," in having had to deal with multiple losses and difficulties: the loss of loved ones, a change in social status, a drop in income, unwanted retirement, and a feeling of uselessness due to cultural devaluation (Butler, et al., 1998). On top of these external difficulties both are struggling with serious vision impairment. Both men have lost their wives, along with lifelong friends, and both live on a low salary or social security. Neither wants or wanted retirement, and so the park has become their source of entertainment and stimulation.

Nat and Midge employ several adaptive techniques to cope with the challenges of aging. One is continuity (Atchley, 1989), in which the person strives to integrate any changes into a whole that stays relatively the same. Therefore, Midge has endeavored to maintain his identity by doing the same things, working in the same job, staying in the same location, for many years past what many would consider retirement age. By spending his free time either listening to music of the 40s or walking across the street to the park, he avoids facing many of the challenges of modern day life in the city. This includes facing the daily loss of self-esteem that comes with constantly having to deal with people who think you are too slow, too old, and too ugly. Also, he declares to Nat that the park bench is "his," indicating that he has repeatedly been sitting in the same spot, probably one that is somewhat less noticeable by most passersby, to maintain the continuity of routine in his life.

Another way to deal with the changes of aging is compensation (Baltes, 1993), or taking actions that offset or make up for a loss in function. Midge has memorized the dials and knows the noises of the boiler so well, that he has successfully diminished the negative effect that his gradual loss of vision might have caused. Nat compensates for his lack of balance and cataracts by using a cane, and later on, a walker. To compensate for his low income (he mentions he is on the Medicaid program) he frequents the back door of a restaurant where he picks up day-old rolls, ostensibly to feed the pigeons.

Nat's penchant for elaborate stories and for actually acting out his fantasies of attempting to save the downtrodden masses, can be viewed as a way of compensation for his feeling of devaluation after he was forcibly retired. His schemes, such as organizing political rallies at the senior center or causing an uprising over high prices at the neighborhood deli, allow him to be in the limelight, a leader, someone to be looked up to. By taking on these different roles, he counteracts one of the most devastating of aging changes, that of becoming what has been called the "roleless" individual (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). If society will not allow him to continue in a useful, active role, then he will create his own. In a way, he is protecting his self-esteem and mental health.

In addition, like Cooper of *Age Old Friends*, Nat uses his creativity and intelligence to counteract boredom and the feeling of uselessness. His ability to step into another person's identity with a moment's notice is fascinating and requires a great deal of mental acuity and a facile memory. Like Cooper, he illustrates that most seniors retain their intelligence and creative aspects into their eighties (Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

Nat's fantasy world can also be seen as a means of denial. As long as he is able to feel useful, as though he is accomplishing something (in this case, social change), he can forget that his body is failing him and that most of society ignores him. Denial can be useful, but according to Butler et al. (1998), it can be counterproductive if it keeps the individual from dealing with the realities of his situation. For example, when he tries to get the Latino punk (an armed thug who is running a protection racket in the park) to stop bothering the weak and to "rise up" with the rest of the oppressed minorities to fight the fascists, Nat ends up getting seriously injured.

Another issue that many elders must deal with is guilt. During the aging process, most seniors do a kind of life review, where they may have to resolve feelings of guilt for the past (Butler et al., 1998). In Midge's case, we hear that he feels remorse for having been a philanderer during all of his five marriages. He obviously feels guilty that he cheated on wife number three, the one that gave him the most pleasure. Nat seems to be trying to work out the fact that although he started out as an activist and member of the labor movement, he only stuck with it for a few years. He obviously did not "practice what he preached." Instead of sticking with the cause of the oppressed, he sold out to a steady job with a good wage that he was good at and allowed him to meet different people every day.

A further aging issue that is addressed is anxiety. Midge lives in fear that he will lose his job and his place to live, so he tries to stay hidden as much as possible. He also feels a very rational fear of the sociopaths in the park that prey on him and the other helpless. One guesses that it is the anxiety of

loneliness that keeps him coming to the park, in spite of the dangers. He meets Nat, and despite his gut feelings that his ideas are "dangerous," continues talking with him. Nat wants to "shake things up" instead of withdrawing quietly, and that is scary in itself. Nat's fear, on the other hand, is that he will say the wrong thing, forget the wrong detail, and be whisked away to a nursing home by his daughter. He thinks of her as his keeper, and tries to avoid seeing her by hiding behind bushes. Both Nat and Midge deal with the anxiety of poverty. What if the prices of food go even higher? What if some emergency not covered by their meager checks or government insurance should divert money from their living expenses? Then there is always the specter of further physical decline. For many older adults, anxiety can be a constant companion.

Midge and Nat have profound effects on each other. Midge is fascinated by Nat's stories, which represent a temporary escape from his routine, though relatively safe, existence. Though he does not want to believe Nat's stories, he nevertheless gobbles them up like forbidden fruit. Vicariously he enjoys the excitement and the purpose of Nat's fantasy lives. When he accepts Nat's marijuana, and relaxes enough to be himself, he can reminisce about his life without feeling guilty that he is being too assertive, or greedy for the limelight. After Nat tries to stand up for Midge's rights as an employee and a human being, Midge begins to think maybe he is worthy of some respect. Later on, after Nat gets him involved in a bogus drug deal to help their young friend in the park, he endures a beating and is hospitalized. When we might expect him to emerge frightened and resentful, his self-image has been immeasurably changed by the realization that he stood up to and put the "fear of God" into

the drug dealer. He never would have had the strength or self-confidence to attempt the scam without Nat's encouragement and enthusiasm. Nat has allowed him to become one of the noticeable ones, not just a nobody, a "ghost" taking up space on the park bench.

Nat, on the other hand, is deeply rocked by the realization that his attempt to improve someone's lot in life almost ended in disaster. He returns to the park to apologize and tell Midge that he was wrong, that high ideals count for nothing. He is, in fact, "retiring his mouth." In spite of his anger at Nat, Midge has had a change of heart, too. Nat's high ideals about justice, about standing up for oneself and friends, may not be so crazy after all. When Nat tells him that his true identity is none of the ones he has talked about, that he is actually a "nobody," Midge will not accept it. Nat has taught him that it is important and valuable to stand up for yourself and for the disadvantaged—to take a risk for your beliefs. Like John Gustafson, he has learned the value of taking risks (Friedan, 1993) and like John Cooper, he has learned the satisfaction of self-efficacy (Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

The relationship between Nat and Midge illustrates the importance of social support in life. To counteract the inevitable isolation of the later years, it is particularly important to seek out friendships and create new "families" wherever one can find them (Bosworth & Schaie, 1997). Nat reaches out to Midge on numerous occasions, in spite of the latter's attempts to ignore him and his "dangerous" ways. Nat insists, "In spite of your chicken shit attitude, we're connected!" He recognizes that human beings are not meant to live solitary lives. Furthermore, he and Midge are in the same boat, cast off from

society. Research has shown not only the psychological importance of social support, but a physical importance as well. One study showed that men who reported high social support had lower levels of three physiological measures of stress—epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol—the stress hormones (Seeman, Berkman, Blazer, & Rowe, 1994). So by first instigating and then maintaining the friendship between them, Nat and Midge are each looking after their own self-interests as well as the other's.

Like Cooper, Nat struggles with his relationship with his daughter Clara. He worries that she will have him committed to a home. We can guess that she has spent months or years worrying about him, and especially his visiting with a variety of characters in the park. Now after his run-in with the park thug, he needs a walker, and she sees him as a obvious target for muggers. Her family life and career are constantly being interrupted by calls about the trouble that Nat's schemes have gotten him into. Although it is obviously very painful for her, she gives him an ultimatum: come to live with her, go into a senior residence home, or agree to go every afternoon to a senior day care center. He responds that the three choices are like "exile in Great Neck, Devil's Island, or kindergarten," and rejects them all.

This is another good illustration of the pain and frustration that elders and adult children suffer to "do what's best." Out of desperation, Clara threatens to have Nat declared mentally incompetent so that she can force him to go to a home. According to her, Nat is "mentally and physically incapable of managing himself or his affairs." She has ample evidence of his escapades to back up her claim. Certainly, Nat's failure to see the potential danger of his

actions is real. Challenging a strong, young sociopath brandishing a knife is hardly wise. On the other hand, it is evident that Nat is not demented. He knows he is playing a part, and though he may carry the fantasy too far, he is able to switch back to his actual identity. Putting him in a home where he would not be "a danger to himself or to others" seems extreme, and insensitive. It is possible that Clara did not really intend to follow through with her threat, and was using it to get him to accept the lesser of the "evils." This is part of the cycle of good, and then hurtful, relations between elders and their children.

Many of Chinen's (1989) steps to maturity and self-transcendence are illustrated in *I'm Not Rappaport*. The theme of facing multiple losses and gradual decline can be seen in both Nat and Midge. They both have lost their spouses and much of their vision. One has already lost his status as an employed person with a decent wage, and the other is about to lose it. But the fact that Nat and Midge do venture out of their respective rooms and risk the dangers of the park, shows that they still have courage to face their fears and look for new experiences.

Self-confrontation, looking at the darker side of human nature and the "shadow within oneself," (Chinen, 1989, p. 21) comes when Nat looks at what he has and has not accomplished with his life. Defending the weak and standing up for oneself takes on a new importance, now that he no longer has to spend all his energy in making a living and satisfying society's views of himself. He no longer has to play a particular role, so he can now take on the roles of "100 different people" who have the maturity and experience to look at the world with a more realistic view.

The third issue deals with the elders developing a new understanding of evil

and the ability to have an "empathic understanding" of human nature. This new wisdom helps the individual protect himself from more powerful forces. So far, Nat's ability to "shake up" the people around him, has given him an edge: people respect him, at least for a short time, and consider him important. Drawing on his memories of personalities he has met in the past, his ability to "con" people into thinking he is someone important helps him stand up to those who would put him down as useless. Unlike most of us who accept or ignore the evils of modern society, he confronts them head on.

Self-transcendence, or generativity, is the ability to put one's former self-indulgence behind and give oneself to others. Nat does this every day by trying to help the poor and helpless of his community. His higher self, one who believes in the rights of all people to be treated as important, replaces his preoccupation with worldly issues of survival. He actually risks his life on two different occasions to stand up for the weak: first for Midge, and then for Laurie, the young artist in the park. Midge also makes this important step when he stops worrying about his own safety long enough to risk his life for Nat.

Emancipated innocence, says Chinen, is the ability to shake off the "pragmatic rationality of the middle years" and return to the child's spontaneity and to "heeding the natural dictates of the soul" (p. 147). Nat illustrates this trait when he throws off his old personality to embrace whatever personality seems called for at the moment. Indeed, his child-like creativity at imaginative play-acting is truly amazing. He successfully ignores society's views about being rational and pragmatic at all times, and surrenders

to the need to "tell it like it is," through his characters.

The sixth task is to reclaim the wonder and delight in life. Each object becomes an occasion for delight. Even though Nat and Midge can no longer see well, they appreciate the simple delights of the park. They no longer see the details of the pretty girls, but they still see the "glow" around them. They enjoy the shimmer and sparkle of the lake, and listening to the children's laughter in the playground. Nat seems to have a childish belief that as long as he really believes, no harm can come to him, and the oppressed will rise up against the fascists. Like Peter Pan, he believes in the mystical power of believing.

The last task for the elder is to take his "enlightenment," his faith in the magical, and pass it on to the next generation. Nat tries to pass on his "born again" passion to his daughter, but she is not receptive. She is in her middle years, when she is consumed by worldly things. Perhaps if we were to see him with Clara's children, we would see him instilling his enthusiasm, integrity, and idealism in them.

In looking at the last scene of the film, it becomes questionable whether completing all the tasks of elderhood are important. Because of Nat, Midge has lost his job, his home, and his severance pay. In spite of their attempts to help, Laurie is still in trouble with the drug dealer. Nat has lost much of his independence, having been forced to move in with his daughter and to visit the senior day care center every afternoon. Both have suffered great physical and mental pain from their escapades together. And yet, there has been a positive change for both of them. Midge has increased his self-confidence and self-esteem. And though he complains about the trouble Nat has gotten them in,

he realizes the value of their new friendship.

In the last scene, after first promising to never tell another story, Nat allows himself to be drawn into one more about his being a movie mogul in the 50s. This characterization gives viewers the inkling that he may be down, but he is not out yet. He still has that glimmer of idealism and self-worth that allows him to face the world each morning. As the camera zooms away from the two men on the bench, we are left with the thought that as long as possible, these two will remain friends. And we know that in a society where elders are devalued and ignored, to have friends can mean the difference between life and death (Bosworth & Schaie, 1997).

The director of *I'm Not Rappaport* uses a variety of techniques to further illustrate and explore aging issues. Although, in general, most seniors are not isolated from their families and friends (Frankel & DeWit, 1989), our urban areas are most apt to illustrate what happens when they are. Almost every character seen in the background in the park is an elder, and each is alone. These images can be seen as metaphors for how we marginalize and ignore the old and weak in our society. Sometimes the person is seen staring blankly into space; he may be picking through trash; he may be under a pile of newspapers on a bench; or he may be one of the park performers, playing an instrument or dancing with a mannequin for spare change. Danforth, on the other hand, the Board member of Midge's co-op building, is representative of society at large. He is so intent in pressing forward in his busy, important life, he hardly stops his workout long enough to talk. When he does, he rushes on in clipped, glib sentences that show no sensitivity to Midge's situation. Although he pretends

to sympathize with Midge's predicament, he obviously feels it is inevitable and just the way things are. He is only interested in the practical issues involved—the bottom line. Ironically, Danforth's career is that of a communication teacher, and yet he has forgotten the most important part of communicating: to listen—not just to Midge, but to all seniors in society who have something to offer, but who effectively, have lost their voices.

The film's director does not only use characters to represent the isolation of elders from the rest of society. The park can be seen as a tidy place to put seniors, the homeless, and other unsavory characters where we do not have to be reminded of their existence. The camera often zooms out from the park to a view of the skyscrapers of the city looming in the distance, seemingly an entire other world. In one poignant scene, Nat lies bleeding on the ground, and Midge is calling desperately for help. The camera pans to the street above, not twelve feet away, where traffic streams by, people hurry in both directions, but no one hears his calls for help. He is a "ghost."

The director also uses music and flashbacks to help us become empathetic and understanding of Nat's and Midge's isolation from the modern world. Midge's scenes are often accompanied by a scratchy old 78 rpm recording of "Alabamy Bound." Nat's are often accompanied by a lone saxophone, playing a somber but inspiring song reminiscent of a communist party rally. Several times we are shown flashback scenes of Nat as a boy, taking part in a strike of the International Garmentmakers Union, or yearning after a young Jewish woman. We see one of Midge's favorite wives in a flashback, and we get a better understanding of the many memories and images that he carries in his mind. Most of the sound track of the film is made up of old-fashioned, solo

instrument music, such as violin classics, 40s jazz, and German polkas, piped out by the merry-go-round's calliope. These images and sounds help make the two men seem more individualistic, and not just "old men in the park."

In Matthau, the director has chosen a veteran actor who is up to the task of defending the old and the infirm, and through his different characters we hear some of their rage at being cast aside by society. In the scene where Nat takes on the persona of Midge's labor union representative, he chastises Danforth for wanting to hide old people, when the old are the survivors. "They know something." To treat them as if they are unnecessary, he says, is a "sin against life. It's abortion at the other end!" He tries to convince him, to no avail, that old age does not mean uselessness—that older people are valuable contributors to society (Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

Matthau's facility at humor also helps keep the movie from being too depressing. At one point he chides Danforth for saying that Midge is an "easy" eighty. "There's nothing easy about eighty," he retorts. This brings us to the relevance of the film's title, *I'm Not Rappaport*. This refers to Nat's vaudeville routine in which two people meet on the street. One insists that the other is Rappaport, even though the latter repeatedly assures him he is not. After many repetitions of "I'm not Rappaport," the joke ends with the passerby pointing out that not only did Rappaport change all his former characteristics, he apparently changed his name, too. This joke makes a good metaphor for society's labeling of all old people as sick and useless. No matter how elders resist these labels or try to present themselves otherwise, society continues to view them in a narrow and stereotypical way. Even when people see or hear of

many individuals who do not fit into these stereotypical patterns, they dismiss them as exceptions, and refuse to accept that elders could be something other than what they expect them to be.

Nat almost succumbs to this prejudice. At the end of the movie he refers to himself as a "nobody." But with Midge's encouragement and friendship, he is able to once more find a scrap of self-esteem and confidence in himself, and embark on a new story. *I'm Not Rappaport* ends on an encouraging note, that in spite of the physical setbacks and emotional trials, the two men will master the tasks of aging together.

Summary

As part of the mass media, the film industry serves to validate and legitimize certain public opinions and preferences. By showing more realistic and positive images of seniors and not reinforcing traditional stereotypes of the aged as sick, mentally deficient, or useless, they can change public perception and understanding of the aged.

Instead of showing elderly women as frail and dependent, films like *Strangers in Good Company* demonstrate to younger generations that older women are often strong, capable, and creative, just as they were before they became elders. Instead of one-dimensional characters, we see women who are complex, interesting and human. We see that even with the challenges and stresses that may come with aging, women are not helpless to adapt or to mitigate the circumstances. Individuals like Winnie, Mary, and Catherine demonstrate the traits of creativity, intelligence and strength that older women can contribute to their family, friends and to younger generations. The public needs many more films like *Strangers* to counteract the traditional images of older women as lonely, disabled, unhappy and confused. It is significant that in attempting to find a representative sample of films about elders produced in the last decade, it was difficult to find one primarily about women. *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Driving Miss Daisy* notwithstanding, male protagonists are still far more common than women. This condition may change as many excellent baby boomer actresses, such as Meryl Streep, Jessica Lange, Diane Keaton and Glenn Close, reach their 60s and beyond. A

few good movies about women in their 50s have already appeared and been having some success at the box office—*The Cemetery Club, The First Wives Club*—so perhaps this is an indication that boomers are already having some effect.

More films like *Grumpy Old Men* and *Dad* can change our perceptions of elders as asexual or no longer capable of sparking romantic interest. John and Max show us how quickly romance can be rekindled at the age of 68. Jake Tremont, in his 70s, demonstrates how a man married to the same woman for over 40 years can still be in love and in lust, with a zest for life not often seen in younger people. Nursing and retirement homes are finally recognizing that seniors are sexual beings and must be given opportunities to express their sexuality if they so desire. Increased exposure of this issue in films can accelerate this long-delayed trend.

As elders live longer, more adult children than ever before are having to learn about relating to or caring for their aged parents. More films like *Dad* and *Age Old Friends* can help younger generations be more aware of elders' special needs and characteristics. How can we be more patient, more empathetic, more respectful of the changes seniors are going through, while at the same time not be too condescending or officious? How can we make the final years of life the most comfortable for our parents without shortchanging ourselves or our own children and grandchildren? Many adults will be glad to pay the price of admission to glean a few insights about this challenging time of life.

Many of us fear aging because we don't know what to expect or how we could possibly cope. Films like the ones analyzed here show us that disability

or unhappiness are not inevitable and that, if necessary, we can learn to adapt to personal losses, disease, or changes in environment. We saw how the women of *Strangers in Good Company* were either healthy and capable, or were adapting to physical and mental challenges. We observed how Jake Tremont faced his impending death by embracing life and his family to the fullest, passing on his wisdom and enlightenment to those around him. Both Cooper and Aylott and Nat and Midge demonstrated the value of late life friendships, and how they can counteract feelings of uselessness, loneliness, or despair. Even John and Max of *Grumpy Old Men* showed us a few tricks about ways to keep busy and entertained after retirement. There are potentially a million ways that seniors can and do cope with aging with creativity and courage, and potentially hundreds of films that could show the rest of us how they do it.

Films on aging not only help sensitize society at large to the realities and positive sides of aging, but they can help seniors as well. Years of seeing elders cast in a negative light in the media contributes to seniors' self-image, at least in respect to how they see themselves being perceived by society. This undoubtedly affects how and to what degree they interact with the community and individuals outside their own age group. For example, many cash-poor seniors have been known to let their homes and yards disintegrate around them rather than ask for help from the community, because they do not like to admit to being helpless. In addition, seniors go through many sub-stages of the last period of life, between retirement or age 65 and death. Viewing other seniors dealing with challenges they have not yet faced can give them hope and

peace of mind about their future. Knowing, for example, that a friendship like Aylott and Cooper's is a possibility, even in the face of Alzheimer's disease, can be enormously comforting.

Watching films like *I'm Not Rappaport* and *Strangers in Good Company* can also help younger generations realize the vast untapped resources we have in seniors. We can only imagine what good Nat might have done, had his creativity and intelligence been channeled in a more practical direction. As elder awareness increases, it is likely there will be support for a more organized way of identifying and utilizing their experience and abilities. It is possible that the Internet will be a prime force in bringing employers or organizations together with interested elders. But before this can happen, society as a whole must come to think of seniors as talented, experienced, valuable individuals. Popular films can contribute to this paradigm shift by providing more vehicles for showcasing the array of senior talents.

The films described here are auspicious harbingers for more of their kind in the twenty-first century. But enlightenment is not likely to be embraced overnight or by everyone. Our industrialized society has had more than a century to establish the accepted view of elders as valueless and pathetic. However, as boomers get closer to their senior years, we can expect to see increased interest and more media attention given to this misunderstood stage of life. Boomers will not only have the interest, but the numbers, dollars, and political clout that earlier generations have not had.

Boomers have a reputation for not taking things at face value, or as the "establishment" dictates. It is likely that they will demand more information

and more accountability from the government and the media regarding the realities of aging. Realizing the economic strength of this group, it is quite possible that the film industry will respond with more films and more realistic portrayals of this cohort.

More realistic films will not only refute the myths about aging as inevitable decline, but will likely illustrate that elders are not that different from the rest of us. That is, older adults have their dreams, love their families, embrace their hobbies, hate to pay bills, enjoy learning new things, and like to spend time with friends, just like the rest of us.

A few years ago, a television series called *Life Goes On* did more for the understanding and acceptance of the developmentally disabled than decades of educational films and public service announcements had done. When people view older adults in a venue that portrays them as complex, unique individuals, perceptions can and will change. The next decades in the media offer the potential for a new interest and respect for aging, and all of us, seniors and younger generations alike, will benefit.

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Appendix A

List of Films Discussed

Berman, Richard C., and John David (Producers). Petrie, Donald (Director). (1993). *Grumpy Old Men* [Videorecording]. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.

Fraticelli, Rina, Peter Katadotis, Colin Neale, & David Wilson (Producers). Scott, Cynthia (Director). (1991). *Strangers in Good Company* [Videorecording]. National Film Board of Canada. Distributed by Buena Vista Home Video, Burbank, CA.

Goldberg, Gary David & Joseph Stern (Producers). Goldberg, Gary David (Director). (1989). *Dad* [Videorecording]. Universal City, CA: MCA Home Video.

Penotti, John & John H. Starke (Producers). Gardner, Herb (Director). (1996). *I'm Not Rappaport* [Videorecording]. Universal City, CA: Gramercy Pictures, Universal Studios Home Video.

Whitley, Patrick (Producer). Kroeker, Allen (Director). (1989). *Age Old Friends* [Videorecording]. Granger Productions, in association with HBO Showcase, New York.

Appendix B

Additional Films on Aging

Camilla (1994)

The Cemetery Club (1993)

Cinema Paradiso (1988)

Cocoon (1985)

Cocoon: The Return (1988)

Driving Miss Daisy (1989)

Enchanted April (1992)

Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)

Grumpier Old Men (1993)

Harold and Maude (1971)

Kotch (1971)

Marvin's Room (1996)

Mom (1998)

Nobody's Fool (1994)

On Golden Pond (1981)

Out to Sea (1997)

The Shootist (1976)

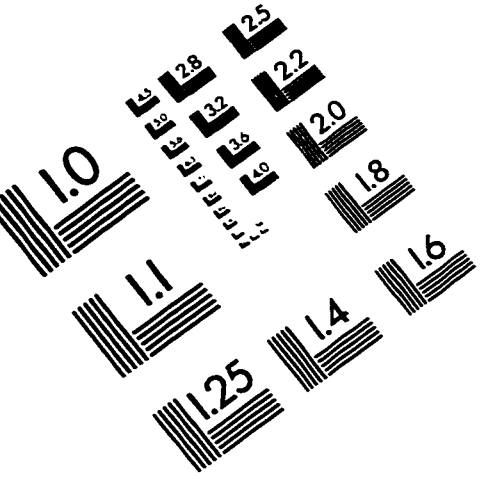
The Sunshine Boys (1975)

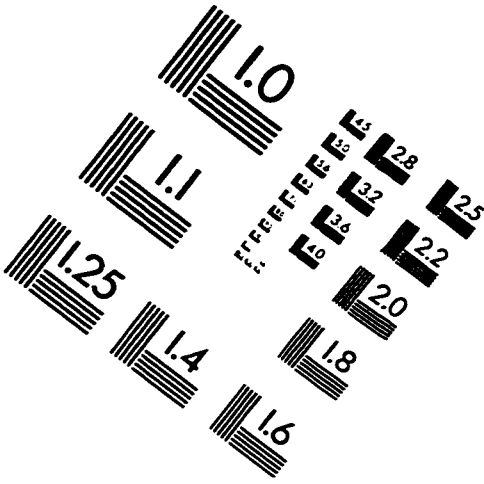
The Trip to Bountiful (1985)

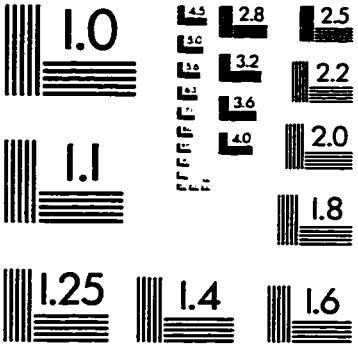
The Wash (1988)

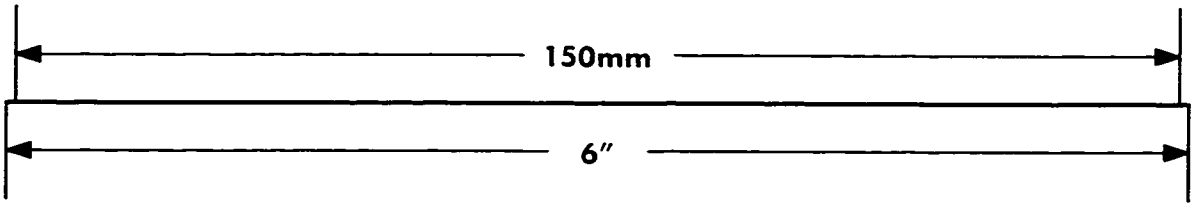
The Whales of August (1987)

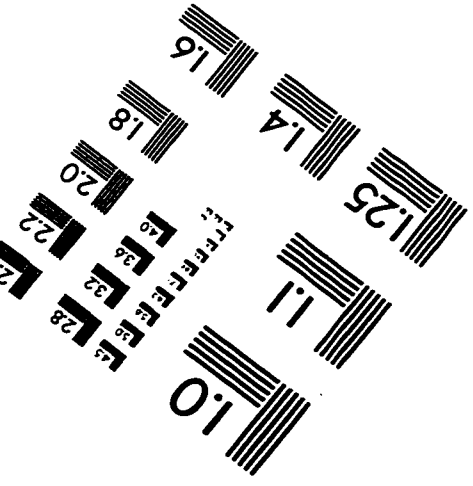
IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)

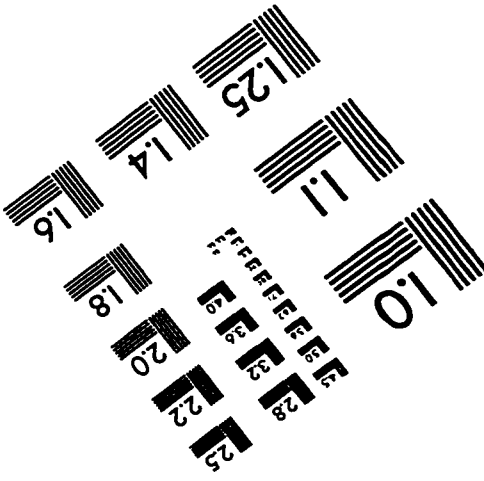












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